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AUTHOR Zimmerman, Sara Olin; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This study examined 50 kindergarten teachers' perceptions of the success of students who were labeled "developmentally delayed," and of students who had not been so labeled. The term "developmentally delayed" is used to identify young children in need of early intervention. Teachers' perceptions about the teaching skills they used when working with the labeled students were also examined. All teachers surveyed were female, had college degrees, taught in Western Kentucky, and had received some undergraduate training in special education. The survey included a brief vignette of a typical 4-year-old. In half the surveys, the vignette stated that the described preschooler was labeled "developmentally delayed." Teachers were asked to use a Likert type scale to respond to two statements about the vignette. Analysis of the data indicated no significant statistical difference between reactions to the two types of vignettes in terms of either predicted success or teaching ability. There was a relationship between teachers' feelings of adequacy in teaching students with special needs and their predictions for student success. A reference list of 20 items is included. (MM)

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Kindergarten Teachers' Expectations of Preschoolers Labeled Developmentally Delayed: A Pilot Study

Sara Olin Zimmerman, Ph.D.
Appalachian State University
Boone, North Carolina 28607

Carol Talbert, M.S.
Western Baptist Preschool
Paducah, Kentucky 42001

Greg Prater, Ph.D.
Murray State University
Murray, Kentucky 42071

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Kindergarten Teachers' Expectations of Preschoolers Labeled Developmentally Delayed: A Pilot Study

Running Head: KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS' EXPECTATIONS

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Abstract

This study investigated kindergarten teachers' perceptions of a child's success in their classroom when the student is labeled developmentally delayed in comparison to students without labels. Teachers' perceptions of their teaching skills when working with labeled students were also studied. Fifty certified kindergarten teachers were surveyed. The results of the investigation indicate that there was no significant statistical difference between reactions to labeled and non-labeled descriptions of preschool children in terms of either predicted success or teaching ability. There was found to be a relationship between teachers feeling adequate to teach students with special needs and their predictions for student success.

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Kindergarten Teachers' Expectations of Preschoolers Labeled Developmentally Delayed

Classifying children by labels representative of specific educational deficits is common practice in special education. Through the recent passage of PL 99-457, Part B, the federal government has mandated the provision of services for handicapped children ages three through five by the 1990-1991 school year (Ballare, Ramirez & Zantal-Wiener, 1989). While states are not required to categorically label three to five-year-old children, they are required to establish criteria to define a population of "developmentally delayed" children. Included in this group are those that exhibit a high probability of developmental delay due to a physical or mental condition. By choice, states may also serve an additional group of children: those "at risk of having substantial developmental delay" (Ballard, et.al, 1989).

For years, special educators have been concerned about the adverse effects of labels in the preschool years. Terms such as "developmental delay" may be noncategorical in nature, but they are in fact labels which may carry negative connotations (Smith & Schakel, 1986). The question of how labels affect students and their academic success is especially critical given recent legislative changes in providing services. We must understand: (1) early intervention program transitions and changes in

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labels, (i.e. noncategorical to categorical), (2) labels most likely to be used, (3) changes of labels due to ages, and (4) potential consequences of labels on both children and their families (Mallory and Kerns, 1988).

It is important to analyze the possible consequences of noncategorical labeling of preschool children. Additional studies are needed to examine these affects. Current practices of noncategorical labels may change in response to PL 99-457 (Lilly and Shotel, 1987). One of the greatest concerns of labeling is that a child may receive a noncategorical label and later automatically be assigned a categorical label. Interventions with preschoolers are more effective when a focus is kept on functional performance rather than a diagnostic category (Sheehan, 1989). Further, a child with developmental delays may, with intervention, outgrow her delays. We must not move too quickly in labeling students when negative consequences may be numerous and the early identification of at-risk children is a complex process with many problems related to measurement and prediction (Lindsay & Wedell, 1982; Satz & Fletcher, 1988).

In general, researchers have reported that teachers lower their expectations of students at various ages who have been labeled categorically (Bryan and Pearl, 1981; Graham and Dwyer, 1987). Teachers and examiners have also failed to elicit maximum performances from preschoolers with labels (Burdg and Graham,

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1984). A possible explanation for this may be that teachers have felt inadequately trained to teach students with special needs (Mallory & Kerns, 1988).

The purpose of this pilot study was twofold. First, to determine if kindergarten teachers' perceptions of a child's success in their classroom varies when a student is labeled. Second, to determine if there is a difference between kindergarten teachers' perceptions regarding their teaching skills when dealing with a labeled or non-labeled preschooler.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 50 kindergarten teachers within 10 counties in Western Kentucky (all female). They had taught kindergarten for an average of 7.6 years. All subjects had earned either a bachelor's degree (n=12) or a master's degree (n=38) and were certified to teach kindergarten. All teachers had received some undergraduate training in special education. Typically the training consisted of one three-semester hour mainstreaming exceptional children class.

Procedures

A descriptive vignette of a "typical" 4 year-old boy was written from preschool descriptors outlined by Leigh and Riley (1982). This vignette was validated as representative of a "typical" preschooler by five preschool teachers with 100% agreement.

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After this validation, the vignette, along with a questionnaire, was mailed to 80 kindergarten teachers in 10 counties. A total of 50 questionnaires (62%) were returned. One half of the vignettes randomly mailed stated that the described preschooler was labeled "developmentally delayed". The other one half included the same vignette, but the child was not labeled.

The questionnaire consisted of a Likert type scale ranging from 1 to 6 (very strongly disagree to very strongly agree) and two statements. The first, "I believe this student has the ability to succeed in my classroom" and second, "I believe that I have the necessary skills to teach this student."

Results

Does the label "developmental delay" affect teachers' predictions on student academic success? Statistical analysis of this question found no significant difference between reactions to labeled and non-labeled descriptions of preschool children. In fact, 84% of teachers predicted the non-labeled preschooler would succeed in their classroom. Further, 95% of teachers predicted the labeled preschooler would obtain academic success.

The second question was, "Is there a difference between teachers' attitudes of having the necessary skills to teach students with and without the label 'developmental delay'?" Again, there was no significant difference between teachers responding to the vignettes on the labeled and non-labeled

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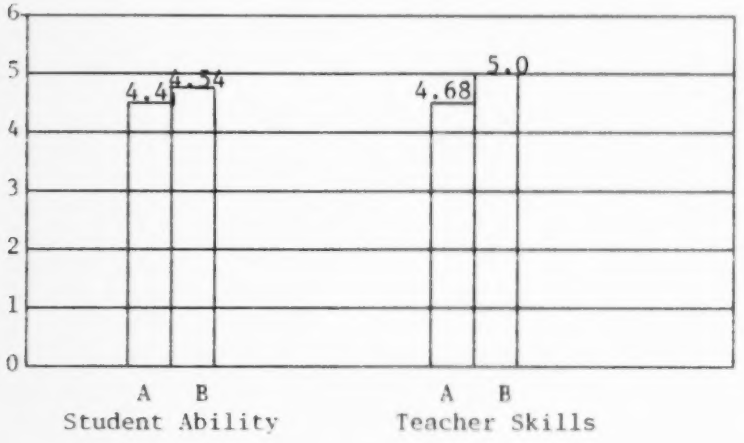
students. Ninety-two percent of teachers agreed they had the necessary skills to teach the non-labeled students on this survey and ninety-five percent of teachers responded that they had the skills to teach the labeled students. Mean comparisons of student ability and teacher skills are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

X Score by Lable



A = Labeled
B = Non-Labeled

There appeared to be a relationship between teachers feeling adequate to teach students with special needs and their predictions for student success. The 5% of teachers who predicted the labeled preschooler would not find academic success also stated they did not have the necessary skills to adequately teach this student.

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Discussion

The field of Special Education has come a long way since its major legislation to ensure services for all students with special needs. With PL 99-457, not only is continued progress being made, but previous mistakes made with older students are hopefully being avoided with this younger population. As educators we know that labels can be detrimental to a child's well-being. We also know that labels exist in order to attempt to classify and help serve a child with special needs.

With PL 99-457 we have the ability to provide services without labels in the traditional sense. As shown in this study, these noncategorical labels may be what is needed to escape previously experiences problems.

From this survey data, it also appears that teachers may be changing their attitudes toward students with special needs. All 50 participating teachers had attended at least one special education class as part of their training. The positive responses toward success in teaching labeled students may be attributed to: changes in personnel preparation in recent year, widespread acceptance of mainstreaming practices, and the creation of a "joint" ownership concept in public education. Hopefully, the positive results are not merely reflecting the novelty of a new label that has not yet been associated with negative connotations.

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The results of this pilot study are encouraging, in that they indicate that kindergarten teachers see themselves as adequately trained to teach students with special needs and they have positive predictions for these students' academic success. As the implementation of PL 99-457 continues, there will be numerous implications for educators. We must continue researching the positive and negative affects of providing services.

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